

THE HANDSOMEST ENGLISHMAN

A Play in One Act

by

Nancy Maki

Cast of Characters

Rupert Brooke: English poet, age 26

Edward "Eddie" Marsh: Private Secretary to Winston Churchill, age 41

Cathleen Nesbitt: English stage actress, age 25

Katharine "Ka" Cox: Friend of Rupert Brooke, age 27

James Strachey: London journalist, age 26

Scene

Eddie Marsh's flat, London, England.

Time

June to October, 1914.

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING: The sitting-room. There is a large cluttered writing table with an upright chair near the fireplace, and an armchair close by. There are other chairs and small tables, the latter piled with books. Paintings in oils crowd the walls. Two windows illuminate the room and one door leads to the hall.

AT RISE: Late morning. The sitting-room is empty.

(EDDIE enters with CATHLEEN.)

EDDIE

I had Mrs. Elgy put the coffee in here. There might be a muffin if you're hungry.

CATHLEEN

Just coffee, Eddie. You remember how I like it.

EDDIE

I do.

(He begins to pour their coffee.)

I wonder if Rupert will remember. A year is a long time.

(CATHLEEN sits in the armchair and EDDIE serves her coffee, which she sets on a small table. He sits in the upright chair, facing her, one arm on the back of the chair.)

CATHLEEN (happily)

It doesn't matter. He's safely home. It's a glorious day!

EDDIE

Almost too glorious to bear, Cathleen.

CATHLEEN

(pause, then a quiet statement)

You felt we might lose him?

(then with a smile)

To the South Seas, perhaps?

EDDIE

I worried he might have an accident.

CATHLEEN (animatedly)

But he didn't, Eddie. He's here! Asleep in your flat!

(She springs up and twirls
around.)

He'll walk through that doorway any minute now!

EDDIE

Won't he be a sight? Yeats called him the handsomest man in England.

CATHLEEN

All those months in the sun. When he came off the train last night.
. .he was shining!

EDDIE

But tired. Exhausted. All the way from America. And the train was so
late.

CATHLEEN

Then we talked until dawn. And we're all tired. But it simply—glori-
ously—doesn't matter.

(She sits back down.)

EDDIE

He was happy to be home, Cathleen.

CATHLEEN

He was exuberant, Eddie!

EDDIE

I wonder.

CATHLEEN

What?

EDDIE

If he'll be content now.

CATHLEEN

You know better than that.

EDDIE

Yes, he's far too fine a poet to settle for contentment. And I say he'll be the best living prose writer. I told him that. The travel letters he wrote for the Gazette were splendid.

CATHLEEN (pause)

He's very young.

EDDIE

I'm not certain what that means. You're younger than he is.

CATHLEEN

I just think he's . . . untethered. I think he's unconvinced of where he should stand. His ideas seem always to be shifting.

EDDIE

Which ideas?

CATHLEEN

All of them. About me. About his friends. About all sorts of people. He seems to struggle as if he were nineteen, but he's almost twenty-seven.

EDDIE

Rupert's brain sparkles too much. It won't let his mind solidify into its appointed shape.

CATHLEEN

What is its appointed shape?

EDDIE

We won't know that for awhile yet. There's his poetry. There's his fellowship at King's. There's London, just waiting for him. . . . His remarkable brain will sparkle over it all.

(pause)

No wonder his ideas change.

CATHLEEN

It's rather unsettling.

EDDIE

You can't require that he be settled.

(RUPERT appears in the doorway, unnoticed by CATHLEEN and EDDIE, but visible to the audience.)

CATHLEEN

I don't require that he be settled. I'm not settled myself.
(pause)
But I'm consistent.

EDDIE

In what sense?

CATHLEEN (unmistakably)

In the moral sense.

(RUPERT enters with panache.)

RUPERT

England is too wonderful!

EDDIE

It is now, Rupert.

RUPERT

(going to Cathleen and kissing her briefly.)

You ought still to be in bed. But I'm glad you came—I'm never going away again without you.

CATHLEEN

(lightly accusatory)

You're leaving today!

(RUPERT sprawls in a chair.)

RUPERT

Just to Rugby. Mother is waiting. Besides, you're off to Paris to beguile another audience. And Rugby is not what I meant by going away.

EDDIE

Cathleen will be back for your homecoming party, won't you, my dear?

CATHLEEN (teasing)

Only if you invite the best people, Eddie.

RUPERT (demurring)

Oh, let us be bourgeois. Get hold of whatever poets, actresses, or lovely people there are.

EDDIE

No "gentlemen", Rupert?

RUPERT

One or two perhaps. . .to balance the actors and artists.

EDDIE

You've had letters from James Strachey while you were away. Shall I invite him?

RUPERT

Good lord, no! Don't invite James! He might bring his brother Lytton and then where would we be? Two Stracheys are a public danger.

CATHLEEN

Don't worry, Rupert. Eddie will provide beautifully. He always does.

EDDIE

We can negotiate the guest list. And Mrs. Elgy, as always, will serve us a sumptuous feast.

RUPERT

(rising enthusiastically)

Mrs. Elgy! I must say hello. That was a fine supper she left us last night.

EDDIE

She's down in the kitchen, and she's missed you.

RUPERT

Cathleen, remember when we had high tea on a silver tray in this very room—on the floor? Mrs. Elgy was dutifully shocked.

CATHLEEN

She was more shocked when I burst in one day and called you a gorgeous piece of flesh.

RUPERT

You're an indecorous female who has no shame. And I'm off to see the woman who truly controls this establishment.

(RUPERT leaves the room
with a bounce in his step.)

EDDIE

More coffee, Cathleen?

CATHLEEN

Yes, please.

(CATHLEEN gets up, hands
EDDIE her cup, and begins
to look at the pictures
on the wall.)

What did Rupert mean about James and Lytton Strachey?

EDDIE

(getting up)

Rupert and James were friends from early school days but Rupert
broke with him a couple of years ago, about the time he came to stay
with me. Before you met him. James and Lytton are part of
Bloomsbury, and perhaps too liberal for Rupert's liking.

CATHLEEN

Rupert is changing. He's . . .hardening.

EDDIE

(slightly alarmed)

He said that to me! He wrote that he had become quite hard, and it
was what he had set out to do.

CATHLEEN

He thinks London's a bad place. He doesn't like my being an actress.
He wrote to me that I should love good and keep away from the evil
things of the world.

EDDIE

(lightly, handing CATHLEEN
her coffee)

And so you should.

CATHLEEN

Eddie, I can't be "divinely good", but that's what Rupert hopes for.
I don't even want to be divinely good. I wasn't meant for that.

EDDIE

(resuming his seat)

You mustn't take everything Rupert writes in his letters so seriously. You know he takes flight when he has a pen in his hand.

CATHLEEN

But there's something real that troubles him beneath it all, I'm sure of it. He's so distressed by what he sees as a ruinous age all around him. And then he's so intense about the perfectibility of man.

EDDIE

Does he want you to be perfect?

CATHLEEN

I think he wants me to be pure.

EDDIE

I'm not sure what you mean by that.

CATHLEEN

(resuming her seat)

Confusing, isn't it?

(EDDIE doesn't answer but leans back in his chair a little. CATHLEEN sets her cup on the small table, then takes a breath before speaking.)

What do you know about Rupert's affair with Ka Cox?

EDDIE

Not much. I know it's over. It happened before he met you. I believe he was strongly affected by it. . .Miss Cox as well.

CATHLEEN

Rupert was different with Ka Cox than he has been with me, Eddie. He didn't want her to be pure. . .except in her soul, I suppose. But I know from his letters that he has difficulty with the idea that sexual physicality can co-exist with spiritual purity in a woman.

(repeating her earlier phrase deliberately)

Confusing, isn't it?

EDDIE (pause)

What do you want from him, Cathleen?

CATHLEEN

He's so different from other men, I hardly know what I want. The words he surrounds me with are beautiful. I love them, yet their extravagance puts me off balance. Some of his ideas about the world frighten me. They're so sudden, and so unexpected.

EDDIE

I daresay Rupert can rant with the best of them, but think how it must be to dwell inside his mind. So many beautiful words, so many burgeoning ideas, coming at one day after day. It wouldn't be merely confusing—it would be daunting. Yet he keeps on writing, no matter how life tears at him.

CATHLEEN

You make him sound tortured!

EDDIE

I know he's torn by conflicting desires. You hinted as much yourself.

CATHLEEN

(She rises, and walks
over to listen at the
door.)

What would make Rupert happy?

EDDIE

To be the best poet in England. To live a life of the mind. I don't think he deals well with that "physicality" you spoke of, even if he longs for it.

CATHLEEN

I hear him coming.

(CATHLEEN resumes her
chair as RUPERT
strides into the room.)

RUPERT

Mrs. Elgy gave me a hot muffin.

(He pops the last
bite into his mouth.)

RUPERT (Cont.)

He settles carelessly
into another armchair,
one leg over the arm.)

Coffee now, Eddie, please.

EDDIE

(getting the coffee)

I have to leave in a few minutes. . . .Winston wants me at the
office, all afternoon.

CATHLEEN

But it's Saturday and Rupert's just come home.

EDDIE

Uncertain times, my dear. It's 1914, and the world is being trucu-
lent.

(He hands a cup to
RUPERT and remains
standing.)

RUPERT

I feel quite out of touch. I've rarely seen an English paper for
months, and they're always weeks old when I do.

EDDIE

Plenty of time for the news of the state. You haven't seen Cathleen
for a year.

CATHLEEN

(She moves to sit on
the arm of RUPERT'S
chair.)

And Cathleen claims all the hours before your train.

EDDIE

(moving towards the
door)

That's right.

(turning back at the
door)

Behave yourself today, Rupert. Maybe Mrs. Elgy will give you lunch
on the floor if you behave.

RUPERT

I shall be the king of propriety for Mrs. Elgy. For the rest, I
promise nothing.

(RUPERT sets his coffee
on a side table and
slips an arm around
CATHLEEN.)

EDDIE
(calling back as he
exits)

I want you to meet Winston Churchill, Rupert. There's no one in the country to touch him.

RUPERT
Eddie never changes. He's devoted to everyone.

CATHLEEN
It makes him happy, and we're the better off for it. He's very excited to have you back.

RUPERT
And you?

CATHLEEN
(She presses her face
against his in a long,
quiet kiss.
Blissful. Can't you tell?
(She rises and resumes
her own chair.)

RUPERT
I've missed you. I've longed for you—so many times.

CATHLEEN
And here I am. The question seems to be, What are you going to do with me?

(The room is silent
for a moment.)

RUPERT (haltingly)
I'm going to see you as much as I can. I'm going to keep on loving you.

CATHLEEN
(pause, then seriously)
But not make love to me. Isn't that true?

RUPERT
(getting up, turning
away from her)
Cathleen, don't do this. Not today.

(A few moments pass.)

CATHLEEN
I want you to settle things with Ka Cox.

RUPERT
(turning to look at her)
I have settled things with Ka. I wrote to her from New York a year ago. A farewell letter. You know that.

CATHLEEN
I want you to settle them more honestly than I suspect you have.

RUPERT (protesting)
I told her I'd been in the wrong. I'd been stupid and blind and blundering. . . . And I told her I had to leave her.

CATHLEEN (standing)
But you didn't end it.

RUPERT
(hesitating, then finally)
I told her that it was the end.

CATHLEEN
And Elisabeth van Rysselberghe? Have you ended it with her?

RUPERT
Elisabeth?! You can't be serious!

CATHLEEN
You were seen, Rupert.
(pause)
I was told.

RUPERT
You're wrong, Cathleen. And it's that rotten crowd you mix with. They feed on rumours and filth. Why did I go away and leave you for a year?

CATHLEEN

To wash yourself clean of Ka Cox.

RUPERT

(solemnly, clearly having
registered her words)

I have staked very much on you, Cathleen.

CATHLEEN

And you want me pure. Not like Ka. Not like Elisabeth.

RUPERT

You're to be my wife! I've written to you every week for the past year, sometimes twice! I've been devoted to you!

CATHLEEN

But now you only say you told Ka it was over. You don't say that it is over. And before you left, you betrayed me with Elisabeth.

RUPERT

It is over with Ka. I promise you. As for Elisabeth, I don't understand. You never mentioned her to me, not once in your letters.

CATHLEEN

I haven't known about her for very long.

RUPERT

There's nothing to know. I'm certainly not in love with Elisabeth.

CATHLEEN

No, I don't think you are. But you betrayed me with her.

RUPERT

Stop saying that! I've never betrayed my love for you.

CATHLEEN (bitterly)

You honestly believe that, don't you? Your love for me is so ideal, so perfect, so inviolable, that making love to another woman is irrelevant.

RUPERT (quietly)

It was November. It was before I'd even met you.

CATHLEEN

And you never saw her again, after you began with me?

RUPERT

Not in the way you mean.

CATHLEEN

(resuming her chair)

You intend that I should be satisfied with that answer, even though you could be lying?

RUPERT

I'm not lying.

CATHLEEN

A lie of omission, perhaps.

RUPERT

(sitting down, sullen)

Whatever that means.

CATHLEEN

It means that you're omitting the nature of your continuing relationship with Elisabeth van Rysselberghe.

RUPERT

(jumping up)

Because I ended it! So it doesn't matter. . . .I saw her a few times in the five months I knew you before I left for America. Nothing happened.

CATHLEEN

(her repetition

clearly on purpose)

And you intend that I should be satisfied with that answer, even though you could be lying?

RUPERT

(sitting down again)

I have nothing else to say to you, Cathleen.

CATHLEEN

Then let me remind you that I am certainly aware that it is never just as simple as "Nothing happened".

RUPERT (pause)

And so we're at an impasse?

CATHLEEN

I guess it depends on how much of your innocence I'm willing to believe in.

RUPERT

You should believe in all of it.

CATHLEEN

Because you do?

RUPERT

Yes.

CATHLEEN

Women are bound to love you, Rupert. I know that. I also know you can be faithful to me if you wish to be.

RUPERT

I do wish to be.

CATHLEEN

I know Ka will write to you, now that you're back.

(pause)

I know she is waiting for you to come and claim her.

RUPERT (rising)

Whatever makes you say that?

CATHLEEN

Her pregnancy, I suppose. . .and the miscarriage. Her sorrow at losing your child. Your guilt at making her suffer. Her absolute love and need for you. Your letters didn't tell me a great deal about Ka, but I listened very carefully to what you did tell me.

RUPERT

Ka isn't waiting for me anymore than I'm waiting for her.

(There is an ominous
moment of silence.)

CATHLEEN

I need to know that's true, Rupert. And you need to know it, as well.

RUPERT

I can't know what Ka is thinking. I can know that I'm not waiting for her. Isn't that enough to satisfy you?

CATHLEEN (pause)

I think you should see her.

RUPERT

You don't mean that.

CATHLEEN

I do. I think you should see her. And not in public, where you'll both be constrained. You could meet here, in Eddie's flat. If it is over, for you at least, it shouldn't upset you that much.

RUPERT

What would be the point of such a meeting?

CATHLEEN

To settle my future. And yours.

RUPERT

And what does Ka get?

CATHLEEN

(after a few seconds,
lightly, and with spirit)

Ka gets another hour or two alone with the handsomest man in England!

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Morning. Three weeks later. EDDIE is working at his writing table. There is a tray with coffee at the end of the table. EDDIE hears a noise offstage.

EDDIE (calling)
Are you finally up, Rupert?

(RUPERT enters, casually
but handsomely attired)

RUPERT
It's only nine-thirty.

EDDIE
(noting RUPERT'S appearance)
You're dressed for the luncheon already? I know you're anxious to meet them, but David and Frieda won't be at the Moulin d'Or until one.

RUPERT
Ka Cox is coming by at ten. I told you yesterday.

EDDIE
That's right, you did. But you were off to that reunion of yours—your Apostles—and so I forgot about Ka. You look a little tired. Was it a good party? Did you see James Strachey?

RUPERT
He was there. And Moore and Norton and Maynard Keynes. Quite a few of them.

EDDIE
And how did you get on with James?

RUPERT
(looking at one or two
of the paintings on
the wall)

RUPERT (Cont.)

James is precisely as he always was, with his clever sense of humour and his liking for contemptuous criticism. But he's selfish and minor—and ultimately defenceless.

EDDIE

If he's clever, then how can he be defenceless?

RUPERT

His sexual career has been unrelievedly sordid. For that he has no defence. I disapprove of him so strongly that I will have to continue to keep away from him.

(pause)

But I think God has been a little too hard on James, dreadful as he is.

EDDIE

Sordid and dreadful. That's harsh judgment, Rupert, especially for such a longtime friend.

RUPERT

(sitting down)

Then he will have to grow up. I won't get down to his level.

EDDIE

We are all flawed.

RUPERT

I know that. I'm extraordinarily selfish. And I'm not to be trusted an inch. . . .But I won't be like James.

EDDIE

Am I not to trust you?

RUPERT (pause)

I use you, Eddie.

EDDIE

It's my purpose to be used. I still trust you.

RUPERT

Do you want to know what I really care about?

EDDIE

My dear, I already know. It's your poetry. What else should it be?

RUPERT

I once told James in a letter that he could not conceive how I love my own company and thirst for knowledge. He made no comment. But of course we wrote countless letters, full of nonsense, and what passed with us for wit. Nonetheless, there was truth too, more truth with James than I ever told anyone else. Some of it was wrong, of course, but it was the truth as I saw it then, and some of it has lasted.

EDDIE

You still love your own company and thirst for knowledge.

RUPERT

Any real scholar will admit to that.

EDDIE

Any poet?

RUPERT

Yes.

EDDIE

Meanwhile, you deal with Cathleen and Ka, and even James.

RUPERT (dismissively)

I don't think about James. And, as directed, I will shortly dispose of Ka. As for Cathleen, she'll soon be off touring in that dreary play, so I'll have plenty of my own company.

EDDIE

And time for friends? London is teeming with writers for you to meet. And actors and artists.

RUPERT

How is it that you know everyone, Eddie?

EDDIE

It's what I do. The arts are my passion, and I help where I can.

RUPERT

You've helped me.

(pause, then significantly)

More than anyone else has.

EDDIE

It's my privilege. I've seen you achieve your instrument. The poems you sent me from Tahiti prove that. When they're published, they'll enhance your reputation enormously, I'm certain of it.

RUPERT

(He stands and wanders
about the room for a
moment or two.)

The game is up, Eddie. I tried to be a poet. And because I was a clever writer, and because I was forty times as sensitive as anybody else, I succeeded a little. But something has happened to me. I told you I had become hard while I was away, and these last poems must have struck you as more objective than the others. . . more controlled by emotion than driven by it. I know you think that shows maturity in the poet, and maybe it does. But when I left Tahiti, I realized that as far as England was concerned, I would be too full of bitterness and too empty of repose to be able to think out anything of substance and write any poetry of worth.

EDDIE

I don't quite understand this bitterness, Rupert, but Cathleen has told me she thought your ideas were changing.

RUPERT

And what did you tell her?

EDDIE

I said that it would be daunting to dwell inside your mind.

RUPERT

We are all flawed, but I am flawed more than most?

EDDIE

No. We are all conflicted, but you are conflicted more than most.

(There is silence and
EDDIE finally looks
at his watch and stands
up.)

Ka will certainly be here any minute. I need to leave.

EDDIE (Cont.)

(He gathers some papers
and moves toward the
door.)

You are a gifted poet, Rupert. You will find your voice again.

(He goes out. We hear
him greeting KA after
a few seconds.)

Thank you, Mrs. Elgy. Good morning, Miss Cox. Rupert is waiting for
you.

(KA enters slowly,
quietly. RUPERT comes
forward to greet her.
She gives him a small
parcel.)

RUPERT

What's this?

KA

Just a shirt I made for you. To welcome you home.

RUPERT

(putting the package
aside)

That was unnecessarily kind.

KA

Not really.

RUPERT

Come and sit down. I'm sure there's some coffee left.

KA

(sitting in the armchair)

I don't want any coffee.

RUPERT

(sitting in EDDIE'S chair)

You asked for this meeting. What do you want?

KA

Don't you want to see me? After so long?

RUPERT

It was suggested to me that I should see you. I don't know that I particularly wanted to. I thought it might upset you.

KA

But not you?

RUPERT

I don't feel intolerably fussed at the sight of you, nor did I expect to.

KA

You're as hard and cruel as ever, Rupert. And it's still a shock. I never quite see it coming.

RUPERT

(anxiously, leaning
forward toward her)

You must get right clear of me, Ka. Cease to love me, love and marry somebody else—and somebody worthy of you. I told you that when I wrote to you from New York.

KA

And then you arranged to have your friend send me the statuette. A mother and a child. You said to let it stand not for what we did but for what we learned.

(pause)

I learned that I would have to do without my child and without its father.

(pause)

What did you learn?

RUPERT

(getting up, moving
away from her)

I'm sorry for the great wrong I've done you. It's the one thing in the world I'm sorry for, though I've done a lot of evil things.

(suddenly turning
on her)

But what could I do? It was so difficult. You had driven me mad.

KA

I know you blame me. You shouldn't.

(pause)

You shouldn't blame me, Rupert.

RUPERT

You stirred me up, that first morning I came to you. Though you didn't love me. Though you still loved Henry Lamb. You pitied me—and I didn't want your love that way.

(pause)

You stirred me up! You held my head against your heart and I thought I had found heaven! You didn't mean anything but all my love awoke worse than ever.

(There are a few
silent moments.)

I wrote some poems about you while I was away. If you read them you'll see that you did me a great wrong. But you'll see that I have recovered.

KA

I never loved Henry Lamb. I soon gave him up. I began to love you. You know that.

RUPERT (suddenly)

You should not have given yourself to me when we were in Germany.

KA (angrily)

That was what you wanted! All your letters. So importunate. So full of all those words you needed to say—like breasts and thighs and cunt.

(quoting him)

You had such lust for my fine body. You wanted to fuck me, to end my randy virginity. You said that chastity had driven you mad.

(pause)

You made it very clear that we would be sexually intimate when I came to Germany that first time.

(pause)

Then you wrote to me afterward about the agony and joy of it all. You said you loved me, in all the ways of love.

RUPERT

(comes and sits down)

I wasn't a success as a lover, was I?

KA

I didn't require you to be more than you were.

(After a little more
silence, she gets up
and begins to wander
around the room.)

KA (Cont.)

She looks at pictures
without concentration.

RUPERT watches her.)

Mr. Marsh has some lovely pictures, doesn't he?

(Finally, she turns to

RUPERT, accusing him.)

You loved me well enough before I gave up Henry Lamb!

RUPERT

I think men catch fire quicker than women, but they may not burn so long.

KA

And for you, burning is everything? You didn't burn for me any longer so you said good-bye?

RUPERT

No. That's not true.

KA (pause)

Can't you be more honest with me now than you were two years ago?

RUPERT

I don't know what you want from me, Ka.

KA (pause)

Tell me how I became dirty in your eyes.

RUPERT

You know that's not what I think.

KA

It's what you thought after Germany. It's how I lost you. It doesn't matter what lovely things you said about me in that letter from New York. After Germany I was degraded in your eyes.

RUPERT

Don't say that, Ka.

KA

Why shouldn't I say it. It's true. In your letters you called yourself filthy and blasphemous, and you said I played with mud. You demanded that I keep clean, that I

KA (Cont.)

should fight for cleanness. I've had two years to think about this, Rupert, to read your letters over and over again to try to understand what happened to us.

(pause)

But I can't understand.

(She comes and stands
beside his chair.)

You told Geoffrey Keynes you had syphilis of the soul. Did I give that to you?

(KA resumes her chair.
Some seconds pass.)

RUPERT

I'm somehow rotten, Ka. I've told you that before. It's nothing to do with you.

KA

It's everything to do with me, Rupert!

RUPERT (defensively)

All right! It has affected you. Through me you've been greatly hurt. Two or three years of your life have been changed and damaged. Your presence now makes me deeply and bitterly ashamed—only I don't know why—I mean, it's not that my mind condemns me, especially. It wasn't my mind that made me hurt you.

KA

Your mind could have stopped you.

RUPERT

My mind was in disarray.

KA

(tolerant, rather than
sympathetic)

I know. . . .You thought the world a horror.

RUPERT

The world is a horror.

KA

A year away from England hasn't brought you any peace?

(with some bitterness)

It must be very difficult to be you.

RUPERT

You are full of accusation and judgment today.

KA

I have nothing to lose.

RUPERT

You place no value on our friendship?

KA

What friendship is that?

RUPERT

We will always have a connection, Ka. At least in my mind.

KA

I don't think your mind is very reliable, Rupert.

RUPERT

The fringe of hysteria being its native place? Well, if I'm acutely sensitive, then so are you. If my mind is fearfully unsure of itself, the same can be said for yours.

KA

(with a slight smile)

Both of us neurotic. And only our extraordinary gift for reconciliation to save us.

(pause)

Only it didn't save us. . .

(Her voice trails off
for a moment.)

I remember something you wrote, just before we went to Germany, that your thoughts about my body were entirely indecent—and entirely clean. That's a terrible paradox to use when people love each other. I realize that now, right now, in a way I didn't comprehend before.

RUPERT

What I wrote was true.

KA

But it didn't need to be. Indecency and cleanliness are not happy words to describe intimacy—not where there is real love.

RUPERT (resentfully)

Obviously, I can't practise chastity and lust with equal ease, or indeed with any ease. . .not like some.

KA

You didn't have to! We were going to be married. You said that it would bring you strength and sanity, that peace you were struggling for.

RUPERT

But I stopped loving you, Ka. The marriage would have been unbearable—for both of us.

KA (protesting)

You could have written your poetry in peace. You wouldn't have needed a keeper for your conscience or a censor for your desires.

RUPERT

I believe my desires would have resisted any tempering hand.

KA

You would have been unfaithful?

RUPERT

I'm not sure. I am quite certain I would have been tempted.

(RUPERT stands up and pours some coffee. He offers the cup silently to KA but she shakes her head. He takes a drink and sets the cup down. He walks purposefully to one of the pictures on the wall and peers closely at it.

KA

What are you doing?

RUPERT

(not turning around)

I'm biding my time.

KA

Until I leave?

RUPERT

Until you come to your conclusion about us.

KA

But you've already made it clear.

RUPERT (turning)

Have I?

KA

Oh, yes.

RUPERT

I don't know how. You should enlighten me. I'm always confused about what passes for love and turns out not to be.

KA

Don't be unkind. Allow me my little belief that you did love me.

RUPERT

I don't deny that I did. And now I'm waiting for you to tell me how I am to label us. You say I've made it clear.

KA (earnestly)

You have your great passions to deal with, Rupert. Burning passions when it comes to women, if I'm to believe your words. You burned for me, but then you had that terrible paradox to contend with—the cleanliness of romantic love and the dirtiness of sex. You fiercely desire both kinds of love and you can't find a way to reconcile them.

(She stands up.)

That's my conclusion about us.

RUPERT

It seems mostly to be about me.

KA (smiling)

Sometimes I think of myself as you. That connection you mentioned is very real for me. I may always be Rupert's Ka, instead of my own.

(She begins to move
toward the door.)

RUPERT

You deserve far better than that!

(KA merely stares at him.)

Don't read my letters anymore. You should burn them.

KA

No.

RUPERT

I think you must.

KA

I can't.

(She takes a few steps toward him and kisses him lightly on the lips. Then she steps backward toward the door.)

Are you going to marry Cathleen Nesbitt?

RUPERT

I think she believes we will marry.

KA

(She stares at him for a moment.)

You should make it up with James. James knows your past. Maybe he can help you.

(KA turns and is gone. RUPERT stares after her, then slowly returns to stand by EDDIE'S chair. The phone on the desk rings three times before he answers it.)

RUPERT

Hello. . .Oh, hello, Mother. . .Yes, I'm fine. . . No, I won't be home again, not for awhile. Eddie has great plans for July, and today we're to meet D.H.Lawrence. . .Yes, *Sons and Lovers*. . .He's always a little hectic, but extraordinarily vivid in his conception of scenes. . .Yes, of course I will. I'll tell you all about it. I promise I'll write to you tomorrow. . .I will. . .I will. . .Yes, all right. Good-bye, Mother.

(He hangs up the telephone and sits down. He thrums his fingers on the table. Suddenly he reaches into a drawer, takes out a piece of paper, and sets about writing, speaking aloud, energetically at first, as he writes.)

Lady Eileen Wellesley:

It seems that I must write to you for a third time in our short two-week acquaintance. Your letters indicate that you are taking so favourable a view of my character that I should, in all fairness, disabuse you of that notion. You are too charming to hear anything but truth.

You must be told that I am rather hard-hearted. I mean, I just enjoy things as they come—things like you—and don't think or care how they affect other people.

(He stops for a moment,
then speaks sadly and
solemnly, as he continues
to write.)

Oh, my dear, I'm rather a horror. You don't know how pointless and rotten a thing you've got hold of.

(He stops writing, puts
down the pen, and rubs
his temples with both
hands. He stands and
walks a little, uncer-
tainly. He faces the
audience, unseeing. He
speaks in the tone of
a formal greeting.)

Dear Ka. . .Your truth is too hard for me.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 3

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Morning. A month later. EDDIE is at his writing table. RUPERT enters with the coffee tray and sets it at the end of the table. He peers over EDDIE'S shoulder.

RUPERT

Does that say WAR CLOUD?

EDDIE

Yes. I always write the most significant things in my engagement book.

RUPERT

Everyone in the governing classes seems to think we shall all be at war. What do you say, Eddie?

EDDIE

Wait a few days and you can ask Winston, or the PM himself. Mr. Asquith has invited us to dinner, don't you remember?

RUPERT

Yes, I remember, but what do you say about the war?

EDDIE

Winston trusts me not to say anything.

RUPERT

(taking his coffee to the armchair. He is quiet and pondering for a moment while EDDIE writes.)

We shall all have to fight.

EDDIE

I don't want you to go. They won't be admitting volunteers to the forces right now, so I don't see how you can go.

RUPERT

But if Armageddon is to be on, I suppose one should be there.

EDDIE

The Gazette might send you.

RUPERT

It's a rotten trade, war-correspondent, when decent people are offering their lives for their country.

EDDIE

What will you do about Cathleen, I mean if you go off to war?

RUPERT

I've sometimes thought that one ought to marry if there were a war. One ought to try to leave a son.

EDDIE

So you would marry her, before you went off?

RUPERT

(ignoring the question,
then thoughtfully)

If I died, it would certainly be better for Ka. The best possible thing that could happen for Ka is that I should be blown to bits by a shell. Then she would marry someone else and be happy.

EDDIE (alarmed)

I can't abide that sort of morbidity, Rupert! Not now, and not if we have a war!

RUPERT

(suddenly jovial)

We can't have a war without death, Eddie, can we?

EDDIE

I insist upon a war without your death.

RUPERT

But I will go, if it begins. You and Winston will find a way to get me in.

EDDIE

Let the rest go. Not you. You matter too much.

RUPERT

(very seriously)

You know better than that, Eddie.

(He gets up, refills
his coffee, and walks
about a little.)

EDDIE

The best and the brightest. I'm afraid they'll all go.

RUPERT

They won't all go. James and Lytton Strachey won't go, nor will any of the Bloomsbury lot.

EDDIE

(pouring some coffee
and sitting down again)

I'm sorry you're so embittered about James.

RUPERT

Why be sorry? It's not a great loss.

EDDIE

It's careless of you to say that. If you dislike that part of your past that James belongs to, then discard the events—but not the friend. You can't discard him anymore than you can discard yourself.

RUPERT

I can't tolerate him!

EDDIE

Then there must be part of yourself you can't tolerate.

(RUPERT returns to his
chair. There is some
silence.)

You should see James again, in spite of how different the two of you may have become.

RUPERT

If we're so different, I can't see that it matters. If we were to meet again, it would be a supreme anti-climax. Now there's a paradox for you. Supreme anti-climax.

(wryly)

Ka would like it. She's interested in paradoxes.

EDDIE

Ka wouldn't like it. You told me she wanted you to see James.

RUPERT

But I don't want to. If there's a part of myself I can't tolerate, as you suggest, I would hardly wish to revisit its genesis.

(EDDIE stares at him, unblinking. RUPERT finally speaks, in astonishment.)

You think I should!

(then sardonically)

James Strachey as saviour! What a lark!

(He jumps up and moves into the room.)

What a lark!

EDDIE

(at length)

I know it's not my business.

RUPERT

That's right! It's not!

EDDIE

I do worry, Rupert, when I think you're struggling.

RUPERT

Well, forget about James. He's no longer relevant.

EDDIE

(He stands and begins to collect his things, getting ready to leave.)

I don't believe that.

RUPERT

I can't help what you believe. Let's drop the subject. Conrad Aitken is coming by. Can you stay and meet him?

EDDIE

(closing his briefcase)

I don't have time, I'm afraid.

(EDDIE takes a few steps toward the door.)

RUPERT

Stop for a minute. Please.

(EDDIE turns toward him.)

You are right about me, Eddie. Sometimes it's terrifying to be inside my mind.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 4

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Afternoon. Two months later.
CATHLEEN is seated in the armchair,
reading a book. RUPERT enters,
dressed in the uniform of a Sub-
Lieutenant of the Royal Naval
Volunteer Reserve.

CATHLEEN (standing)
You look splendid!

RUPERT
(removing his cap, crossing
the room, and kissing her)
I joined the Navy just to hear you say those words. Have you been
waiting?

CATHLEEN
(She sits down.)
Not long. How was lunch at the Admiralty?

RUPERT
(taking off his jacket)
Winston was very cheerful, and he said one thing which is exciting ,
but a dead secret. You mustn't breathe it. His game is to hold the
Northern ports, from Dunkirk to Le Havre, at all costs. So if
there's a raid on any of them, at any moment, we shall be flung
across to help the French reservists.
(He kisses her again,
then sits in the chair
at EDDIE'S desk.)

CATHLEEN
Are you excited by this?

RUPERT
Excited, depressed, it changes daily, even hourly. I spent time in
Germany, remember, a good bit of time. I liked the people I met
there very much.

CATHLEEN

And now?

RUPERT

They're still my friends. They're my friends but I'll have to fight against them. One doesn't have a choice.

CATHLEEN

How can you be excited about something so dreadful?

RUPERT

Because it's not longer possible to give more than a passing thought to private affairs. The war keeps on intruding, you see. It's very insistent on having one's attention all to itself.

CATHLEEN

No, I don't see. I don't see how you can be excited, or how Winston can be cheerful.

RUPERT

It's because we'll be doing something! We'll be moving forward, against the enemy!

(pause, then deeply
earnest)

It will be hell to be in the war, but it would be hell to be out of it.

CATHLEEN (protesting)

You've only been home for three and a half months!

RUPERT

(springing up, raising
CATHLEEN from her chair)

Yes, by god! Not nearly long enough to fill myself up with Cathleen! You had that infernal tour in July, which was to have been our month. I haven't seen you nearly as much as I deem essential.

(He kisses her at greater
length than before, then
releases her.)

What shall we do this afternoon?

CATHLEEN

I'm not going to see you for awhile so we must take a walk, and we must read some poetry. Then we should have tea, somewhere private and special.

RUPERT

Whose poetry?

CATHLEEN

John Donne's, I think.

(pause)

I've learned some lines of "The Anniversary".

RUPERT

Then we must have them, right now.

(He sits on a chair
at the side of the
room, by the windows.)

Where shall you stand?

CATHLEEN (demurring)

It's only a few lines, Rupert.

RUPERT

But it's Cathleen Nesbitt speaking the words of John Donne. A certain formality is required.

CATHLEEN

(taking a standing
position across the
room from RUPERT)

The sun itself, which makes times, as they pass,
Is elder by a year, now, than it was
When thou and I first one another saw:
All other things to their destruction draw,
Only our love hath no decay:

(pause)

Who is so safe as we? Where none can do
Treason to us, except one of us two.
True and false fears let us refrain,
Let us love nobly, and live, and add again
Years and years unto years, till we attain
To write threescore: this is the second of our reign.

RUPERT

You recite beautifully. And Donne is always best. He knows about love and death. But you left out all of the middle verse.

CATHLEEN

Yes. I don't want to think of graves and corpses.

RUPERT

What was that line about safety?

CATHLEEN

Who is so safe as we?

RUPERT

Yes.

CATHLEEN

Where none can do treason to us, except one of us two.

RUPERT

The first part. About being safe. That's the part that strikes me. We are safe, you see. Despite the war, despite anything. Safe even if we die.

CATHLEEN

I don't understand. How can that be?

RUPERT

Because of what we've already been given. All the things in life that we've loved.

CATHLEEN

But I'm not ready to put life in the past tense. I'm hungry for more of the things that we've loved. Besides, I think Donne intends something very personal in this poem. "All other things to their destruction draw, Only our love hath no decay."

(She moves to the arm-chair and sits down.

She looks steadily at

RUPERT.)

If all things are going to be destroyed by this war, then I want to have your child.

(It takes some time
for RUPERT to answer.)

RUPERT (sharply)

Does that mean you're ready to give up this beastly stage business you're so devoted to?

CATHLEEN

It means I want to have your child! How could you answer me that way?

RUPERT

I don't know. I shouldn't have. You surprised me.

CATHLEEN

You can't be surprised. We've talked about marriage so often. How many times have you said that only in love and marriage will you be able to find peace?

RUPERT

(getting up and pacing
a little, finally
stopping and speaking)

Queer things are happening to me, Cathleen, and I'm frightened. It's partly the war.

CATHLEEN (strongly)

The war doesn't frighten you. I think you like the war.

RUPERT

I hate the war! I hate what it will do.

(pause)

I hate the waste.

CATHLEEN

But it doesn't frighten you. You want to be in it. It's not the war that's making you draw back from me.

RUPERT

Is that what I'm doing?

CATHLEEN

That's how it feels.

RUPERT

I don't mean to draw back. I don't want to.

(becoming a little
alarmed)

I can't let myself go adrift again. I daren't go wandering.

CATHLEEN

Do you mean away from me? Adrift from me?

RUPERT

(in some despair)

Oh, Cathleen.

RUPERT (Cont.)

(He turns away from her and sits, head down, in a chair across from his latter seat. CATHLEEN watches for a few moments, then goes to him. He looks up briefly, then down again. She finally sits in a chair close by and at last he speaks.)

I've loved you a long time, Cathleen. . .but not in the complete way of love. There was something rooted out of my heart by things that went before. I couldn't feel that flame of worship I should have felt.

CATHLEEN

Don't, Rupert.

RUPERT

You mustn't stop me.

(pause)

Oh, God, I knew how glorious and noble your heart was. But I couldn't burn to it. I loved you with all there was of me. But I was a cripple. Incomplete.

CATHLEEN

All this time I didn't realize how easy it was for you not to make love to me. It's easy if one doesn't burn, as you say.

(pause)

Why on earth did you think we should marry?!

RUPERT

Because I do love you! You can hardly doubt that.

CATHLEEN

But not in the complete way of love. Isn't that how you put it?

RUPERT (pause)

Yes.

CATHLEEN

Then why marry me?

RUPERT

The more I know you, the more I love. And the more I know and love, the more I find you have to give me, and I to give you.

CATHLEEN

And yet you draw away.

(She gets up and goes
to look out the window.
After a moment or two,
she turns back. She
accuses him.)

I think you know your own desires very well, Rupert.

RUPERT

What does that mean?

CATHLEEN

It means that there have been women in your life that you have desired intensely. But it seems that once your desire is satisfied, it wanes, and you move on.

RUPERT (insulted)

You make me sound morally impaired.

CATHLEEN

I think you have a sexual appetite you can hardly bear to admit to.

RUPERT

(a little scornful)

Is that what you think?

CATHLEEN

(continuing as if
he hasn't spoken)

The real problem is that you don't feel you have the right to satisfy it outside the bonds of marriage. I'm certain you were taught that you don't. So you view women as either virtuous—or impure; and you make love exclusively to the latter. Somehow you see them as less worthy, not meant to be your wife or the mother of your children.

RUPERT

I thought Ka was meant to be my wife.

CATHLEEN

You broke the rules when you made love to Ka. And you see what happened.

RUPERT (pause)

The rules don't fit me very well.

CATHLEEN

Then change them.

(She sits down in the
armchair by the writing
table.)

RUPERT

I can't change them! I believe in them!

CATHLEEN

Rupert, you can't divide the women of this world into mothers and whores!

RUPERT

Am I supposed to give up the idea of marriage and sink prematurely into a celibate middle age?

CATHLEEN

(with a slight smile)

I don't think celibacy lies in your future.

RUPERT

Or monogamy?

CATHLEEN

You can't be a husband and a philanderer at the same time. Your rules don't permit it, and the guilt would tear you apart.

RUPERT

(getting up)

I don't want to be a philanderer.

CATHLEEN

I know. But I'm not sure you want to be a husband either.

RUPERT

How you must detest me!

CATHLEEN

I just want you to be honest with yourself.

RUPERT

(full of self-loathing)

You think I don't know what I am? I'm very well acquainted with my multitudinous sins.

CATHLEEN

(She goes to him.)

We all sin, Rupert.

RUPERT

(breaking away)

Not you! Not Eddie!

CATHLEEN

(withdrawing to the windows, standing in the silence)

Who is so safe as we? Ironic, isn't it?

RUPERT

(now on the opposite side of the room, facing her)

If we're to go on together, I will have to find the way.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 5

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Morning. A few days later. RUPERT in a dressing gown, carrying a tray, enters, followed by JAMES STRACHEY.

RUPERT
(setting down the tray,
pouring coffee)
Not in uniform yet, James?

JAMES
You could give me coffee before you start hammering me, Rupert.

RUPERT
(handing him the coffee)
Here you are. Sit in the armchair.
(RUPERT picks up a plate.)
Muffin?

(JAMES takes a muffin,
then sits down, setting
his coffee aside. RUPERT
fixes himself a cup,
takes a muffin, sits at
the writing table, and
begins to eat.)

JAMES
I was surprised you called. What could you possibly want from a eunuch? That's what you called me in your last letter.

RUPERT
No, I said your opinions were eunuch.

JAMES
Since eunuch is a noun, I drew the conclusion.

RUPERT
I've called you far worse than that.

JAMES

Indeed.

RUPERT

You've benefitted from all the hammering, if I'm not mistaken.

JAMES

I don't love you—like I did for all those years—if that's what you mean. I don't feel nearly so abject in your presence—or your absence.

RUPERT

(passing JAMES the
muffin plate, then
sitting back down)

That was nonsense anyway. Your cleverness has finally prevailed. Except in some of those opinions of yours—damned silly and slightly dangerous.

JAMES

I won't fight with you, Rupert. I don't even know why I'm here.

RUPERT

Ka thought I should see you.

JAMES

I don't understand why. She knows we disagree over everything.

RUPERT

It's not about everything. Certainly not the war, nor Lytton and his liberal friends.

(pause)

It's not about the present.

JAMES

Now that's disappointing. I won't be able to explain to you how utterly ridiculous you've become. Lytton said you cut him at Drury Lane a month ago.

RUPERT

Your brother is passe. The war means everything now—at least to anyone who knows what England has done for him. Let's forget the obvious nastiness of Lyttonism.

JAMES

You may find this hard to believe, but Lytton said it was impossible not to like you, impossible not to hope you might like one again.

RUPERT

Lytton and his cronies are a menace to all good. I can't like them again.

JAMES

Does that category include me?

RUPERT

(getting up, moving
about the room)

You're different from creatures like your brother.

JAMES

I don't have his influence so I'm not the same menace, is that it?

RUPERT

You are less singular than Lytton, that's true, but you're clever enough, and eccentricity has its shortcomings. It's your humanness that matters—it's more pronounced than his, and it makes you accessible, and steadfast to your friends. Like Ka. You've helped Ka.

JAMES

Don't be nice to me, Rupert. It's unnerving.

RUPERT

(stops, looks straight
at JAMES)

I'm going to the war, you know. Winston has a new division, a land force, but administered by the Admiralty. I'm off on the 27th.

JAMES (jovially)

You're finally escaping!

RUPERT

Escaping? From what?

JAMES

From all those women you've never been able to stay committed to.

RUPERT

Oh, yes, legions of them.

JAMES

(still spirited)

That's the price you pay for being so glamorous. Too many opportunities. You should have taken the advice you gave to me and stayed with balls. Fewer promises to make.

RUPERT

No more promises! I can't keep them!

JAMES

It may surprise you, but I believe I could keep a promise to a woman.

RUPERT

You're not so often tempted as I am.

JAMES

Why? Because you're beautiful and I'm not? Beauty is hardly a prerequisite to temptation. You're not so egotistic as to believe that!

RUPERT

You know I'm not. . . .Maybe it's that I'm presented with more possibilities than you are. Temptation without possibility is no temptation at all. One doesn't have to make a decision.

JAMES (cheerfully)

I've hardly ever resisted temptation. One makes room for it.

RUPERT

(coming to his seat)

And no guilt?

JAMES (considering)

Is this the argument then?

RUPERT

What argument?

JAMES

The argument you can't resolve. Should one feel guilt over indulging in the fleshly pleasures—how do I put it?—a) outside of wedlock b) when promised to another? c) when both a) and b) occur simultaneously?

RUPERT

The idea of guilt obviously amuses you.

JAMES

The idea of your guilt sickens me. When I knew you, you were free.

RUPERT

We are obliged to be moral!

JAMES

We are obliged to avoid evil!

RUPERT

Define evil.

JAMES

That which causes someone to suffer.

(RUPERT doesn't respond.
JAMES goes to replenish his coffee. Then he walks about the room, turns to RUPERT, and speaks playfully.)

And by that logic, you may continue to enjoy carnal delights outside of marriage, but not if you are promised to a lady other than the object of your current lust. Providing, of course, that the latter has herself no designs of permanency on you.

RUPERT

Only prostitutes have no illusions.

JAMES

A whole new world at your door.

RUPERT

I should have stayed in Tahiti.

JAMES

Yes, you should. The Ranees couldn't reach you there.

RUPERT

I don't blame my mother for this. All my life I've done as I pleased. I made my self in the image I wanted. . .But life became complicated and I discovered I couldn't control it anymore. And then I couldn't control the self I had made.

JAMES

So you built an edifice of morality to do it for you. Rules and traditions and ethical behaviour—they make a carapace for you, inside of which you squirm, as itchy and aggressive as ever.

RUPERT

I said you were clever.

JAMES

(sitting down)

Why must you dislike everyone of your acquaintance who doesn't hold your views?

RUPERT

I don't anymore. They're not relevant to me, except if they won't fight for their country. Then I can't abide them.

JAMES

I don't believe in war.

RUPERT (irritably)

Then stay home and be a friend to Ka! Be useful!

JAMES (suddenly)

Are you going to marry Cathleen Nesbitt?

RUPERT

Why?

JAMES

Ka said you might. But then I heard you were seen with Eileen Wellesley.

RUPERT (edgily)

I told you I had legions of women. Do you have a point to make?

JAMES

I suppose you look absolutely arresting in your uniform.

RUPERT (sarcastically)

Absolutely arresting.

JAMES (gaily)

Then I'm certain you should go off to war, the sooner the better. It'll be Lord Byron again if you stay, and no Europe to escape to when the scandal breaks.

RUPERT

I haven't enlisted to escape.

JAMES

You should have. It's perfect for you. No more women. All those meaty young men.

RUPERT

You disgust me, James.

JAMES

(He gets up, looks
around at the room,
speaks sardonically.)

Are we finished then? Are there no more muffins? Has Rupert solved his dilemma?

RUPERT

I told you this wasn't about the present.

JAMES

Of course it is. The past becomes the present and there one is, warts and all.

RUPERT

You said I used to be free. Apparently, you still are.

JAMES

But I never had the kind of freedom you had. Everyone loved you. Everyone wanted to be with you. My appeal was limited, so my life never became as complicated as yours. I didn't need a new set of rules to live by. My freedom was small, but I was never in danger of losing it.

RUPERT

Why couldn't I make it work with Ka?

JAMES

Look, I've never understood the insanity of that entire year. You seemed to be crashing. You demanded everything—then when you got it, you threw it away. You broke with Ka. You became harsh, and quite misguided, and you broke with me. You left your world behind.

RUPERT

Why did I do that?

JAMES (exasperated)

I don't know why! I was there, but I was always watching you from the wings. And I was never quite privy to what the central character did when he was offstage.

(pause)

If you want me to guess, I'd say you were the possessor of a large ego and an equally large array of appetites, all of which were fed far too often, thereby making you voracious and cruel. You were exceedingly clever, but pathologically sensitive and lethally high-strung. It was a recipe for disaster. You were bound to combust. When you finally put yourself back together, you didn't quite get it right.

(pause)

Now are we finished?

RUPERT

You're in a hurry to get away from me, James. That's new.

JAMES

Listen to me. I came because I was curious. I don't know what I expected. I knew it couldn't be anything much, since there was nothing I wanted from you.

(pause)

Still, the muffins were excellent, so not an entirely wasted morning.

RUPERT

And is your curiosity satisfied?

JAMES

Go back to your books, Rupert. Stay away from the fancy ball. You're not up to it. Write your poetry, and leave the women alone. They'll be the death of you.

(JAMES exits.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 6

SETTING: The same.

AT RISE: Late evening. About two weeks later. RUPERT enters in a dirty uniform and takes off his jacket and shirt, down to his undershirt. He collapses into the armchair. After a moment or two, EDDIE enters, carrying a tray with sandwiches which he sets on the writing table. He remains standing.

EDDIE

(passing a plate)

Mrs. Elgy left some sandwiches.

RUPERT

Mrs. Elgy's sandwiches and then a bath. This must be Paradise.

EDDIE

And then you'll tell me more about Antwerp.

RUPERT

As much as you'll listen to. I can't stop thinking about it.

EDDIE

Were you very much afraid?

RUPERT

I was all right for nerves and fatigue. I don't know how I should have been if shrapnel were bursting on me and knocking the men round me to pieces.

(EDDIE is silent at this.)

Did I tell you the Brigade lost its luggage? It was all at Wylrick Station, which the Germans destroyed. I lost a few poems—but they weren't finished. It doesn't matter.

EDDIE

Can you rewrite them?

RUPERT

I don't want to.

(pause)

Everything is different now.

(pause, then brightly)

More sandwiches, Eddie, please.

(EDDIE passes them.)

I'll keep the plate. I'm learning to eat whenever the opportunity arises. It's the first lesson of soldiering.

EDDIE

Why don't you want to rewrite your poems?

RUPERT

When we were waiting at Dunkirk to move up to Antwerp, the C.O. told us, quite ill-advisedly as it turned out, that we would all be killed, either in an attack on the train or when we arrived to relieve the Belgian troops. Anyway, I didn't think, What a damned fool I was not to have written more. I merely thought, What Hell it is that I shan't have any children—any sons. The poetry didn't seem quite so important.

EDDIE

Just stay alive, my dear. Have your sons, write your poetry, anything you want to do, but stay alive.

RUPERT (cheerfully)

We were only three or four days in Belgium, Eddie. It's just the beginning. The central purpose of my life now is to get good at beating Germans. I'll certainly try to stay alive—but it could prove a slippery business.

(CATHLEEN enters.)

CATHLEEN

May I come in?

RUPERT

(standing, going to her)

My darling girl! How beautiful you look! How wonderful to see you.

(He kisses her, then
remembers his dishabille)

I am unbearably filthy. Talk to Eddie while I clean up. Give Cathleen what's left of the sandwiches, Eddie. And some sherry! We must all have some sherry!

(RUPERT exits. EDDIE
pours some sherry.)

CATHLEEN

Thank you for telephoning. I'm so grateful that he's back safely.

EDDIE

He says it's only the beginning. And the strange thing is—he doesn't seem to mind.

CATHLEEN

I know he doesn't. The war doesn't frighten him. He told me we are safe, even if we die, because of the things in life we've already been given.

EDDIE

For a man who admits to being extraordinarily selfish, that seems like a new frontier.

CATHLEEN

It is new.

(pause)

And it makes me wonder if he's running away.

EDDIE

Running away? From what?

CATHLEEN

From the things that perplex him. . . things that stop him in his tracks.

(pause)

Perhaps from the women in his life.

EDDIE

Rupert loves you, Cathleen. He loves his mother. You are the women in his life.

CATHLEEN

(She sits down in a
chair near RUPERT'S
armchair.)

It's more complicated than that.

EDDIE

Can't you consider that he might be running toward something?

CATHLEEN

That might be true—or partly true.

EDDIE

Don't forget, he wouldn't even consider a staff appointment. He requested active service. Running away wouldn't have required him to do that. Nothing required him to do that. He simply required it of himself. Rupert has loved this country all of his life. It's natural for him to need to defend it.

CATHLEEN

I still don't know that I would have expected him to act so unselfishly.

EDDIE

Great men are often unselfish in their public lives, though they might be quite the opposite in their private ones.

CATHLEEN

Is Rupert a great man?

EDDIE

I believe he has the seeds of greatness growing in him.

CATHLEEN

Why is it difficult to love such a man?

EDDIE

He has his greatness to pursue. It comes first, without exception.

(pause)

It's not easy, always to be second—or third.

CATHLEEN

How do you manage?

EDDIE

I have no illusions or expectations. I'm grateful for any of his time—and for his friendship. I suspect it's much easier for me than it is for you. You are entitled to expectations.

(He pours more sherry,
then sits at his table.)

CATHLEEN

Maybe not, Eddie.

EDDIE

Because of the war?

CATHLEEN

The war. And other things.

EDDIE

We will live in a shadow as long as he is in the war.

(pause)

I expect you know what he is to me—certainly the thing I'm most proud of.

(CATHLEEN begins to cry.
EDDIE goes to her, pats
her, gives her his hand-
kerchief.)

CATHLEEN

I don't want him to die! I was shocked when they sent him to Belgium so soon. He'd only been in training for a week. I was terrified that he'd be killed, and we hadn't even had our chance together.

(She wipes her face and
gathers herself. EDDIE
slowly recedes and sits
back down.)

EDDIE

You might as well be brave about this because he seems to have decided that he's a soldier.

CATHLEEN

How many dreams will be left in ruins by this war?

EDDIE

We can no longer afford our dreams.

CATHLEEN

Rupert left his dreams behind when he enlisted. It didn't seem to cause him much regret.

EDDIE

(pause, then gently)

Do you mean that he left you behind?

CATHLEEN

Not so much as that I assumed a different role in his life, less defined than my previous role.

EDDIE

Isn't it possible that the war required him to change your role?

CATHLEEN

Maybe it did. I'm just saying that he didn't refuse the opportunity.

EDDIE

And now he's been to Antwerp, and it may be possible that your role will change again. "Everything is different now"—that's what he said just before you came in.

CATHLEEN

(looking toward the door)

Here's Rupert, Eddie.

(RUPERT enters in casual shirt and pants, hair dampish. He leans down and kisses CATHLEEN saying, "My dear." He takes more sandwiches and EDDIE pours him some sherry.)

RUPERT

(He remains standing. He speaks in dead earnest.)

A toast! To the three of us. . .safely here together.

(Each lifts his glass to the other.)

Now I can tell you both about Belgium.

(to CATHLEEN)

Eddie has already heard the military details—we reported directly to Winston as soon as we got back. But there is so much more.

(pause)

The first two days were nothing really, a good deal of waiting, and cold, and not sleeping very much. When we were

RUPERT (Cont.)

finally sent in to relieve the Belgians in the trenches, it was too late to stop the German advance. At length, we were ordered to withdraw and we began a twenty-five mile march to St. Giles.

A day or two before, on our way to Antwerp, we had met endless wagons of dead and wounded retreating from the bombardment—but that was nothing compared to what we encountered now.

It was one thing to see lakes and rivers of burning petrol flooding from the oil-tanks the Germans hit at Hoboken. The smoke was blinding and the carcasses of horses and cattle were sizzling in the heat. It was one thing to see this nightmare landscape. . .but the real nightmare came after we crossed the Scheldt River.

Thousands of refugees, their goods on barrows and hand-carts and perambulators and wagons. Moving with infinite slowness out into the night, two unending lines of them, the old men mostly weeping, the women with hard drawn faces, the children playing or crying or sleeping. That's what Belgium is now: the country where three civilians have been killed to every one soldier.

When it was decided to evacuate Antwerp, all of that population of half a million, save a few thousand, fled. Half a million people preferred homelessness and the chance of starvation, to the certainty of German rule. It's queer to think one has been a witness of one of the greatest crimes of history. Has ever a nation been treated like that?

It's a bloody thing, half the youth of Europe, blown through pain to nothingness, in the incessant mechanical slaughter of these modern battles. I can only marvel at human endurance.

(A moment of silence ensues.)

EDDIE

What happens now, Rupert?

RUPERT

Now England is fighting for something infinitely greater than herself.

EDDIE

What happens to you?

RUPERT

I have a week's leave. I'll go down to Rugby to see my mother and I'll try to pick up some new gear. Then I'll be back here for a day or two before I rejoin my unit.

EDDIE

(standing up)

It's very late. I'm going to say goodnight. Please write to me, Cathleen, and let me know where you'll be touring. I'm glad you came.

CATHLEEN

I'm glad too—very glad, thank you, Eddie—and I will let you know where I am.

(EDDIE exits. CATHLEEN stands and goes to RUPERT. They embrace.)

RUPERT

I am writing a sonnet. Don't tell a soul. If it gets finished, you shall have it.

(He moves to refill their glasses. CATHLEEN resumes her seat and RUPERT comes to sit beside her.)

The sonnet is called "Safety". It tells about us, but it's for everyone. I have used Donne's words—remember?—"Who is so safe as we?"

CATHLEEN

I'm trying very hard to feel that safety, and the brightness you wrote to me about—but I don't think I can. I'm too afraid of the war. For me it's dark, not bright. I can't see it your way.

RUPERT (intently)

Do you know what a trust you hold for the world? All those men at the front who are fighting for some idea called England—it's some faint shadowing of the things you can give that they have in their hearts to die for. All the things in life that they've loved.

CATHLEEN

But maybe they don't see it as you do. Maybe they can't find any safety in it. I know I can't.

RUPERT

There is a kind of safety in knowing you have tried to protect the things you've loved. What is the alternative? Not making that attempt? It would be unthinkable.

CATHLEEN

(almost warning him)

You can't make this war into something noble, Rupert.

RUPERT

Yet in all the theatres of this war, men and women will perform acts of nobility that will be numberless.

CATHLEEN (pause)

The deaths will be numberless, that's certain. All the young men rushing to volunteer—don't they understand they're probably rushing to their deaths?

RUPERT

(standing, moving about)

What would you have them do? What choice do they have? Except to watch their country disappear. Most of the men I was with felt they were doing something necessary. They felt a fulfillment in repaying their country for its gifts to them.

CATHLEEN

You want it to be like that with all the soldiers, don't you?

RUPERT

What I want is for them to be awakened to the only bearable interpretation of what this war means for us who will fight it.

CATHLEEN

Tell me what that is.

RUPERT

The war means that we will be roused out of the human mediocrity in which most of us wallow and slumber, and be driven by necessity and honour toward the highest human good.

CATHLEEN

And what if there is agony on this road?

RUPERT

Then Death will be our worst friend.

CATHLEEN

(standing, moving
closer to RUPERT)

You haven't yet witnessed the slaughter of your comrades, Rupert, only the deaths of strangers. What will happen to your ideals when your friends are dying all around you?

RUPERT

Neither the awful idea of death or the terrible fact of it will be allowed to matter. Not if a man intends to fight for his country.

CATHLEEN

As you do.

RUPERT

As I do.

CATHLEEN

You've found your way.

RUPERT

Yes. I think so. I'm horribly saddened by what I saw in Belgium, but it's made me more resolved as a soldier.

(pause, then with
a little surprise)

At the same time, I'm feeling somewhat happy in my military work, if that's to be understood in any way.

CATHLEEN

It's a peculiar thing, to be happy at a time of general disaster.

RUPERT

A poet is a peculiar being—and that's what I am. I'm not a hero, that's certain. It's the Kingdom of Art I believe in—where nothing alters, or decays, or goes away, where death is halted, where life is preserved in the luminosity of its best moments.

(pause)

It's where I reside.

(pause)

You can always find me there.

(CATHLEEN AND RUPERT
remain standing,
facing each other.
After a few moments,
a voiceover begins.)

VOICEOVER

Rupert Brooke died of septicemia on April 23, 1915, during an expedition of the Allied fleet to Constantinople. He was twenty-seven. He is buried on the Greek island of Skyros in the Aegean Sea. These are his words:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

(BLACKOUT)

THE END